

## **"High Road, High Calling"**

Philippians 4:4-9

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It's too easy to hear a text like this one, and slip selectively into a sentimental look backwards, to a perceived time when the values lifted up by this text were fully realized. It's too easy to do that. It's also not an accurate rendering of history. Because there has never been a time, in the history of time, when the call to live according to these ideals wasn't urgently needed. There never was that "better" time, that perfect, Norman Rockwell era, as many like to pretend.

It is also too easy to read a text like this one while surveying the environment in which we currently find ourselves—listening to the tone, enduring the decibel level, sensing the anger and hostility, and find ourselves overwhelmed and incredibly discouraged—questioning any reason we may have to hope for anything better.

In many ways we are living in an unprecedented time. It's an ugly time, a divisive time when, as citizens, we are so easily pitted against each other and played, by powerful interests who seek to benefit from our divisions, our anger and our fears. So the admonition to demonstrate gentleness, to lift up that which is true, that which is honorable, that which is just and that which is pure, sounds in the parlance of today, like a foreign language.

Because today, it seems to be all about being brash and loud, not gentle. It's about truth, but truth as you define it or ignore it. It's about honoring one's self and that which will advance your agenda or enlarge your bank account. No, it's too easy to hear this text in light of the many competing and shouting voices today, and feel a sense of despair about it all.

What seems to be missing, what seems to be needed, and what Paul seems to be encouraging, is a deeper sense of civility within the communal life of those early Christians in Philippi. Civility has such a nice ring to it, does it not? It too congers up images of more peaceful times—those less combative times when gentlemen in the upper corridors of power knew how to engage one another as fellow citizens, without anger or rancor, and without calling into question the moral character of those with whom they happened to disagree.

But I think we need to be very careful here. Civility has also been used as a mask, covering up ugly and inconvenient truths. Civility can be a convenient excuse not to talk about certain things because it might make some among us feel awkward or uncomfortable. When people say, "We've lost our sense of civility in this country," I understand the sentiment, but I also wonder what they really mean? Because again, it harkens back to a perceived time when, in the name of civility, life was, shall we say, genteel.

And I worry that as was the case in the past, what is perceived as genteel was really just a time when people were put in their place and didn't make waves, simply in order to get by and survive. And the alarming resurgence of a blatant racism that seems emboldened, shines light into the darkness of what some call America's "original sin," slavery and discrimination in its aftermath.

It's hard to confront that. It's painful to be reminded of it, or to perhaps learn about the extent to which we are still haunted and plagued by it, as a nation. Civility doesn't mean a lack of anger. Ask Martin

Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks, whose nonviolent actions were carried out with their personal but restrained anger. And speaking truth—lifting up truth and calling out what is just, which is also a way of calling out what isn't, doesn't imply disloyalty to one's country. To the contrary.

Let your gentleness be known to all. Find and focus on that which is true, that which is honorable, that which is just and that which is pure. Could it be that the words of Paul are challenging us to a high calling—to take the high road in a low time which, while ultimately good for the community, isn't always easy. Being gentle while an anger rages deep inside of you—speaking truth in love isn't always easy.

I have yet to watch an NFL football game this season, not by design or as some deliberate protest on my part. And before I say any more about this, please don't think I'm telling you what to do. I know you'll do whatever you want to do anyway. I'm just sharing with you how I've been feeling lately.

When the San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, took a knee during the National Anthem to protest the ongoing abuse and discrimination of black people in this country, I thought it was a bold and courageous act. It turns out that it was so bold, it cost him his job.

When other players joined him in solidarity by doing the same thing, I found myself moved as entire teams came together, even the players who chose not to kneel, stood behind those who did, and laid hands on their shoulders in support of their kneeling teammates. And when some NFL owners joined their players on the sidelines in those moments, I thought it was an amazing symbol of the powerful, coming alongside of those who have experienced struggle and discrimination in ways those owners not only haven't, but can't imagine experiencing.

So if, as NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has recommended, owners begin insisting that players stand for the National Anthem, then I will intentionally refuse to watch another NFL game this season. What began as a quiet protest by a man of color, has nothing to do with the flag, which is an inanimate object. And it certainly has nothing to do with disrespecting the military.

Instead, it has everything to do with what that flag represents, which includes among other things, the First Amendment and freedom of speech, and the freedom we have to gather in places like this, as well as that man's right to kneel in silent protest over his country's policies. That the argument has evolved so quickly from one man's attempt to call out existing racist realities, to instead being about disrespecting the flag and the troops and the National Anthem, demonstrates just how deeply embedded racism still is in this country.

But I think the reason I just haven't bothered to watch an NFL game this season, is about something else. And this is where I will be curious to see what team owners do about mandating that players stand for the National Anthem. And again, you are free to form your own conclusions, I'm simply sharing with you some of what I'm sensing these days.

The National Football League, as a system, and in what it represents, is a modern day, sanitized but eerie reminder of plantation slavery. Billionaire team owners, each one of them a white man, sitting high atop the stadiums paid for with the help of government handouts, in their luxury sky boxes looking down on the field—the field, as a predominantly large number of black men sacrifice their bodies for the financial gain of the team.

Oh, come on preacher? Really? No one is forcing them to play the game. Besides, they get paid so much money. They should feel honored to have the opportunity to get rich in America.

In the days of slavery, defenders of the institution actually claimed that slaves were grateful to have three meals a day, and that most masters took very good care of their slaves. I did some checking, and according to a National Bureau of Economic Research study, published by ESPN, the average NFL career lasts 3.3 years. And while the money may be good, 78% of the players are broke within three years after their careers end.

So if I end up not tuning into the NFL this year, I won't do so by trying to lead a crusade or by shaming those who choose otherwise. I will do it because I have simply decided that a gentle, truthful, honest, personal protest, will serve my own sense of doing what's right for me.

And in reading this text, I simply wish we all had a better sense of letting our gentleness show, and of respecting the gentleness in others, especially when it comes to quiet, respectful protests, acts of defiance and expressions of conscience. We cannot change the tone or substance of the current, national conversation. What we can do, however, and what we are being called to do, is to practice our own sense of gentleness. To cultivate the gentleness within ourselves and to let it be known to everyone.

To focus on whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable, whatever is pleasing, if there is any excellence or anything worthy of praise—we are being asked to concentrate on those things.

Paul reminded those early Christians, like we are being reminded today, that despite the world in which we find ourselves, despite the tone and rhetoric and the way it seems to be arranged against us, and everything we believe in as people of faith, that if we find ourselves discouraged and feeling hopeless, we are nonetheless called to a high calling and to always take the high road.

We must never succumb to the temptation of lowering ourselves to compete on the playground of the dishonest, or to collude with those who have no honor and are unjust.

Instead, we must let our gentleness be known to everyone. And then in prayer, and in casting on God all of our worries and fears—our anxieties about today, we can experience a peace that passes all understanding. And I know this, if peace is to be experienced it will certainly be beyond my understanding. In the living of these days, that's what I want. Is that what you want?

I need to be reminded that in a world where I don't see a way, God makes a way. In a world where I only see darkness, God shines a light. And where I struggle to find hope, God has already established a hope that cannot fail.

People of God, despite these crazy days and tumultuous times, may you find your hope renewed and strengthened. And may you experience that ultimate peace, which passes all understanding, keeping your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.